



CROSSROAD

TAKE A BOW, BREAK A LEG, AND STOP THE SHOW

This year has been my 45th year on stage. So my editor and I thought: Why not have a series of writings that celebrates the creative space I have called my own for so many years?

Let me begin with the end. When the play is over, we, the actors who have performed, take a bow which is called the curtain call. In the last three or four days of rehearsal for a new play, we rehearse the curtain call as well. Different plays have different curtain calls. One thing is common though—we invariably take the bow during a curtain call, in an expression of our humility.

The stage has borrowed many a practice from the West, and taking a bow is one of them. In the early '70s, Zia Haider, renowned playwright, stage director, and president of our group, taught us the curtsy and the bow. Having studied drama at East West University in Hawaii, he knew more about theater etiquettes than most of us. Women curtsied by holding the two sides of the dress (in our case the sari), and men took a bow by taking off the hats. By the '80s, we gave up the curtsy, and took up the bow, rendering the act unisex.

Before staging a new play, we, the generation that was born under British rule, wish each other by saying “break a leg.” I had always wondered who came up with the term and what it really meant. Now I have learned it may have originated from the practice of curtsying or bowing, both of which require you to fold your legs at the knee, thus “break a leg”, or “have a great show so that you may break the leg on a happy note at the curtain call.”

Some conjecture that “break a leg” could also be meant to ward away evil so that the performance is not jinxed, just like we cross our fingers when we are talking about something that we want to go well. By saying “break a leg,” we



The cast of *Naam Gotrohin* take a bow, a practice borrowed from Western theatre.

have nullified the jinx, and the play is safe.

Our presentation has adopted a lot of practices from western culture, meaning British, European and American. The audience that comes to watch a play is not necessarily familiar with these customs. In Broadway and West End, I have seen the audience continue to applaud until the whole cast comes back to the stage for another bow. The cast usually continues to return to the stage, taking up to six to eight bows, and exiting for good only once the applause has subsided.

We like to call our audience our Laxmi. If the auditorium is full, we are so happy that this in itself elates us and the quality of the performance goes up many notches. But Laxmi has not been taught by western culture. Our Laxmi does it quietly, and one has to get used to it. Though a loud applause does give the performer a high, one has to feel that elation in other ways, and we should not expect our Laxmi to behave in a western manner. Sometimes we, the performers, complain like spoilt children, mumbling

under our breath, “Bengalis do not know how to clap.” My two cents is that we should be more accepting. Before we whine and pine away any further, let us also remind ourselves that the cell phone in almost every person's hand in the audience also makes it harder for the individual to give a big clap! That is the hazard of new age technology, and it merits a separate discourse.

Although the curtain call is perhaps not met with as loud a response as in the West, we have “show stoppers” as marks of appreciation. If a scene is well enacted, at its end, the performers express their approval with a loud applause. But applause at the end of a scene does not really “stop” the show, i.e. interfere with it. You are in trouble when you get the laughs or applause right in the middle of a scene. It is usually a loud and a long laugh, accompanied by claps. Sometimes, while the audience is still reeling with laughter, the performers try to go on with the scene, but end up making a mess. In such a scenario, the audience cannot focus and the dialogue has simply gone over their head. The

rule is, at a show stopper, the performers should stay on script and in character until the laughter has subsided. After a few viewings of a play, we can predict which moments will be show stoppers, and are prepared for when the laughs will be coming. But there is a catch here as well. The expectation of laughter creates a sense of competition, and every actor tries to outdo the other in wringing out a laugh from the audience.

Exasperated by the melodrama and the overacting, a director of my group had once abandoned a play he had directed for many years. He had said, “I cannot control your overacting; the play is no longer my own. It is yours. Do it whichever way you want.” It was the '90s, the play Dewan Gazi, and the director Asaduzzaman Noor MP. Thankfully, things changed when we made a comeback with the play in 2015.

** Much of my writing on show business is and may be inspired by the book “Totally Scripted” by Josh Chetwynd. This is a book on the history of the idioms in the English language that originate from Hollywood and Broadway.*

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TRAVEL

WHY HEAVENLY BOSNIA DESERVES TO BE YOUR NEXT TRAVEL DESTINATION

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The war drastically changed the demographics of the entire region. Today, Sarajevo's population is 80.7 percent Bosniak, 3.7 percent Serb, 4.9 percent Croat and 10 percent others.

Sarajevo's streets are littered with reminders of the war and a sense of macabre is undeniably present throughout the city. One typical mini memorial I kept coming across is the red roses of Sarajevo. Every other street has a section of the pavement that looks damaged, but upon getting closer, I realised that the damaged pavement is painted red and forms a rose-like shape.

A Sarajevan explained to me that “these damaged parts of the pavement are where artillery landed and killed someone during the war. Rather than forgetting our past, we want to remember each and every individual tragedy, each life lost. We painted a red rose as a sign of love and peace. Because this is not an official memorial, the roses sometimes disappear. If the government decides to redevelop the street, people get angry about it.”

Cemeteries play an important role within Sarajevan culture; the city has integrated graveyard space into its everyday social life. I went to a few graveyards and saw people having picnics. A local explained to me that “Bosnian Muslims have always had a very open attitude to death. It's a part of life. Why hide away from it? Why shouldn't graveyards also be public parks?”

Sarajevans love life. Huge developments across the city, which not only include new shopping centres but also restoration of historic sites, opening of galleries and museums, give a clear impression of a place moving on.



A view of Sarajevo's old market.

Hikers and trekkers will be in heaven in Sarajevo; I walked up a steep hill and reached the yellow fortress, where I saw many young and old relaxing and enjoying the stunning views of the city at sunset.

There is no shortage of places to visit, hills to hike or adventures to be had in the city. Getting lost is not an issue; the locals are warm and friendly and are willing to help you find your way. I should warn you that food portions are large here; a little salad is a mini feast. But if Sarajevo doesn't win you over, surely Mostar will.

A two and a half hour drive from Sarajevo to Mostar has to be among the most beautiful and stunning rides of my life. Green and lush valleys, snow-peaked mountain tops, clear river, mini mosques and churches in tiny villages – it could be the description of paradise itself.

Once you enter Mostar, the city does not disappoint with its old stone streets, vibrant market place and tasty food. Undoubtedly, the main attraction is Stari Most, a 16th-century Ottoman bridge

which is aesthetically pleasing but difficult to walk across. Also known as the Old Bridge, it was destroyed during the Croat–Bosniak War 427 years after it was built. It was finally rebuilt in 2004. It is a hump-back bridge; it goes up, stabilises in the middle, before going down again.

Locals look amused as tourists struggle to cross the bridge and some even hold onto the railings while crossing. It took repeated attempts before I could confidently cross it.

One local man climbed to the ledge of the bridge. As a crowd gathered, he worked them up, and when enough people had gathered, he jumped off the bridge and landed safely into the crystal-clear waters below.

From Mostar, it is easy to travel to anywhere in southern Bosnia. There are numerous towns, villages, cities, historical sites and nature reserves to visit.

A must-see is the Kravice Falls, 40 minutes away by car. The beautiful waterfalls are an ideal spot to go for a swim, take photographs, relax and eat



Red roses painted on the pavements of Sarajevo as a sign of love and peace for those who lost their lives in the war.

Cevapi or grilled kebab in bread. Even on a hot day, being close to the water will keep you cool as you listen to the sounds of crashing water.

Coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina is an unforgettable experience. For many, the word 'Europe' conjures up images of Paris, London or Berlin, but the so-called 'other Europe' is as important to the identity of modern Europe.

Despite its troubled past, the importance of Bosnia – especially at a time when reductionist identity politics is sweeping the Old Continent – is about demonstrating the multiethnic and multifaceted of Europe's past, present and future.

Beyond the history and political lessons that can be learnt in Bosnia, it is also a cool place to enjoy good food, great sights and warm people. The place is really opening up to tourists and it deserves to be on your travel checklist.

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By arrangement with the Dawn.



A view of Sarajevo from the mountains that surround it.

ABOUT TOWN

ALIVE IN THE SUPER UNKNOWN

Organiser: Indalo

July 21, 4-8 pm, Russian Cultural Centre, Dhanmondi

VOYAGE OF STRINGS BY NILADRI KUMAR

Organiser: Blues Communications

July 21, 7-9 pm, Bangabandhu International Conference Center, Sher-E-Bangla Nagar

LOVE IN DHAKA CONCERT WITH SUNIDHI CHAUHAN

Organiser: The Grand Master Events Ltd.

July 27, 5-11.30 pm, International Convention City Bashundhara, Purbachal Express Highway

CONCERT FOR 'AHON'

Organiser: Dhaka University Band Society –DUBS

July 24-25, 10 am – 9 pm, TSC, University of Dhaka